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When Foreign Policy Founders

Behind the Making and Breaking of U.S. Diplomacy

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 WASHINGTON

It was perhaps inevitable that one result of the Iran fiasco would be mounting calls for institutional reform of U.S. foreign-policy machinery. Already there are demands for a clear delineation of responsibilities to establish that the secretary of state is the nation's principal manager of—and spokesman for—foreign-policy issues. There are also calls for the appointment of a national-security adviser who has more experience in foreign policy than Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, whose career has been entirely in the military, as well as for a restructuring of the National Security Council.

There are, however, definite limits to what can be done. Because so many executive-branch agencies now have a legitimate interest in foreign affairs, it is unlikely that we will ever again have a single pole of authority within the government determining the nation's foreign and security policy—unless that person is the President himself. Henry A. Kissinger attempted to play such a role in the special circumstances of the Nixon presidency. The result was both bold decisions and appalling errors.

In most Administrations, U.S. policy will be the result of shifting Cabinet coalitions. And this is not necessarily a bad arrangement, provided an Administration appoints qualified people to key positions and puts in place a viable system of policy coordination.

In this regard certain concrete steps can enhance the likelihood that an Administration will be able to carry out an effective foreign policy.

Because other Cabinet members with a legitimate interest in foreign policy will not take orders from the secretary of state, in every Administration more power will flow to the White House and the national-security adviser than the purists deem desirable. Otherwise there will be no one to arbitrate disputes.

But if a powerful NSC is inevitable, a decline in its quality is not. It is not inevitable, for example, that the National Security Council be as poorly staffed as is now the case. During the transition between the Carter and Reagan administrations, even secretaries were fired. All institutional memory was lost. If a strong NSC is here to

stay, it should be possible to ensure that a certain percentage of the staff consists of permanent civil servants. A post of permanent secretary might be created; then, an incoming administration would at least know the record of the past. Outgoing administrations could be barred from removing any records unless copies of all important documents are left for those assuming office.

Administrations should move to demilitarize personnel appointments for NSC adviser and staff. The NSC should be forbidden to engage in diplomatic or military operations. For adviser, preference should be given to someone with broad experience in foreign policy who is nearing the peak of his career. Such a person would be less likely than recent incumbents to pursue personal ambitions to the detriment of the national interest and administration policy.

There are also important reforms that could be taken in the Central Intelligence Agency and the State Department. In recent years, administrations have come to regard the job of CIA director as just another political post awarded to a worthy supporter. Thus Jimmy Carter tried but failed to appoint former Kennedy White House confidant Theodore C. Sorensen, and Ronald Reagan succeeded in appointing his campaign manager, William J. Casey.

This trend is a mistake. The development of sound foreign policy requires that the President receive objective intelligence, untainted by domestic political considerations. Such advice is less likely to come from a man who is as closely tied to the political fortunes of a White House incumbent as Sorensen might have been or Casey is. The CIA director should be a civil servant appointed to a four-year term that comes due between presidential elections.

Proposals to reform the State Department are legion and largely irrelevant, for most attempt to restore an authority that can never be reclaimed. The world has changed and a nation's foreign policy will henceforth involve a broader array of activities than traditional diplomacy. Moreover, it is hardly a recent historical phenomenon for a presidential adviser to have as much or

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more authority in the field of foreign policy than the secretary of state. Col. Edward M. House in the Wilson Administration was more important than Secretary of State Robert Lansing; Harry Hopkins was more important in the Administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt than Cordell Hull. Kissinger was more important than William P. Rogers and the influence of Zbigniew Brzezinski certainly rivaled that of Cyrus R. Vance in the Carter Administration.

But it is important for every Administration to have a strong secretary of state because he represents a point of view that needs vigorous support in government councils. Consequently, one reform that every Administration could institute would be to appoint a person prepared for the job.

There is a naive belief in the United States that any reasonably intelligent man can be secretary of state or ambassador. But diplomacy is like any other field. Those who have spent time in it tend to be better than those who have not. Rogers was a fine attorney general in the Eisenhower Administration and Shultz was an excellent labor secretary in the Nixon Administration. But neither was prepared to be secretary of state and neither should have been appointed. Rogers never did grow into the job. The nation must hope that Shultz finally will.

But it is also time to face a larger reality. The extent of foreign-policy failure in the Reagan Administration is so extensive that no mere institutional fix will work. The problem is no longer this individual or that institution. The problem has become the policy generally—a crabbed, mean-spirited, belligerent view of the world that is steadily isolating this country from its friends and offering unexpected opportunities to its enemies.

Iran has, in effect, become a symbol for a larger national failure under this Administration. Six years into the Reagan presidency, wherever one looks, American options seem fewer and American influence less.

The Administration came into office contending that it was going to enhance American diplomatic prestige abroad and restore the CIA to its previous glory. But as the Administration moves into its final two years, these promises seem increasingly empty.

Internationally, U.S. diplomatic pres-

tige has seldom been lower. In the Middle East, for example, the Reagan Administration has been without a policy ever since a lone suicide bomber blew up the Marine barracks in Lebanon. The Iran initiative now compounds earlier damage: not only is the United States not playing a constructive role in the peace process, it is undermining the position of moderate Arab states attempting to contain Iranian fanaticism. Moreover, by unwisely making contact with Iran through Israel and directly or indirectly condoning Israeli arms shipments to Iran, the Administration contributed mightily to the paranoid mythology of the Middle East—particularly among Arab states, and thereby made the task of future Administrations immeasurably more difficult.

In southern Africa, the Administration's policy of constructive engagement has led the United States into a political cul-de-sac. It now has little influence with the whites and none with the blacks. For the remainder of the Reagan Administration the United States will be relegated to the diplomatic sidelines.

In Europe, for the first time in the postwar period, Soviet diplomatic practice is viewed as favorably or more favorably by normally pro-Western circles than U.S. diplomacy. In Central America, the Administration has progressively narrowed U.S. options to two: failure or military intervention.

The one bright spot in U.S. foreign policy seems to be Asia, but the Administration's mismanagement of international

economic policy is undermining the success of its political policy even there.

Nor have the Administration's policies toward the CIA been any more successful. The Administration has lavished responsibility on the CIA, with unfortunate results.

The Casey CIA has participated directly or indirectly in illegal actions against the government of Nicaragua. Moreover, once again a CIA director has placed his loyalty to the White House incumbent above his obligation to the law. It turns out that even though the CIA is required by law to inform the appropriate committees of the Congress of any significant covert CIA activities, the CIA did participate in the Iran initiative yet failed to inform those appropriate committees. By that single action Casey destroyed whatever trust had been built up between the agency and the Congress.

Because the Administration is in such difficulty, there will be a temptation to look for a scapegoat—someone who, by leaving, can reduce the pressure on the Administration. McFarlane's attempts to assume all the blame have not worked, nor will any reported intra-Administration efforts to have Poindexter removed. Neither the Administration nor the country will solve its foreign-policy troubles so easily. Institutional changes can help but the real problem is the policy itself. Unless that changes, the next setbacks may not be as embarrassing as the setback involving Iran—but they will surely continue. □